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The Afghan War Isn't Over Until the Afghans Say So

By James Pittaway

PAKTIA, Afghanistan — The idea that Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev — in the new spirit of dialogue following the Geneva summit — might sit down and settle the war in Afghanistan, has been wafting around the media for some time now as the conflict goes into its seventh year.

Knowledgeable people I have talked to in Pakistan — including American analysts, relief workers, French doctors, Afghan politicians and the resistance (mujaheddin) representatives — insist that the mujaheddin cannot be coopted into any superpower deal.

And up here at the Hizb-e-Islami mujaheddin base camp it is possible, in the clear mountain air, actually to see several of the very good reasons why no "Great Power" deals are going to lever aside this war, no matter what trade-offs or incentives might be lying on the table.

Despite the effort being made in many different forums — including the United Nations and informal contacts — any external solution likely to be cooked up presupposes that the Afghan resistance can be forced or persuaded to stop short of outright victory. That supposition withers when one confronts the reality of the situation on the ground — or in the mountains as the case is here.

To the mujaheddin, victory means the immediate withdrawal of all Soviet personnel and the complete dismantling of the ruling Karmal regime, including turning over major functionaries to mujaheddin justice. This total Soviet capitulation is not in the cards that anyone has shown or talked about to date.

It might just be barely conceivable that one of the eight major resistance factions — which are united only in opposing the Soviets — could be induced or bribed to participate in some deal. But bringing most or even a few of these factions along is a pipe dream. So the question is: Can the Afghan resistance be brought to heel either by military means or by cutting off their supplies?

From the rock I'm sitting on, I can see a base camp and supply depot that cannot be taken or destroyed, areas where mujaheddin operations cannot be militarily denied and lines of supply and communication that are impossible to cut. So the answer from here is — as long as the mujaheddin choose to fight, they can keep fighting.

The rock is on a ridge line about five miles inside Afghan territory, along the Pakistan border. At 10,000 feet on the shoulder of a 16,000-foot mountain, the view is spectacular, and facing southwest I can look down along a sizable piece of border real estate.

Immediately below me is the base camp of the Al Fatah brigade of Hizb-e-Islmai mujaheddin. (Hizb-e is generally considered the most radical of the Islamic "fundamentalist" factions.) I have seen three other such Hizb-e installations in this area and accept the assurances of my hosts that the entire border and interior is infested with camps that are similarly well located, organized and defended.

Off to my right about 3,000 feet down and maybe eight miles distant on the open Jogji plain lie the hulks that remain of the Russian tanks and armored personnel carriers that tried to make it into these mountains. Some are two years old; the rest date from a few weeks ago when the Soviets mounted their second major assault on this region — so near and yet so far.

Looking at the narrow passes and ridges the Soviets would have had to negotiate had they ever made it into the foothills, I am forced to wonder if that was ever their real objective. My opinion is that they never intended to actually get at these camps, but sought to drive the remaining civilian population from the plains below. The harvest rotting in the one-third of the fields planted there this year bears witness that they succeeded in that.

Whatever the Soviet intentions, the facts are that despite massive and coordinated air and ground assaults, they have been unable to get even one tank into these mountains.

The camp itself is protected from Soviets jets by its ingenious construction and location. A bombing run would include coming over the ridge upon which I am sitting, passing deep into Pakistan territory, turning over the regional capital of Parachinar (which is heavily defended by the Pakistani military) and attacking from Pakistan.

Even then, the vertical drop of the campsite and the way the buildings are dispersed and dug into the mountainside would make accurate and effective bombing impossible. The frustration of pilots who dump their loads on Pakistani towns — which amount to mujaheddin supply depots, and which they can, in fact hit and damage — is understandable when seen from here.

The camp is peppered with Chinese-made heavy machine guns and a few anti-aircraft pieces. The latter would do little against jets, but would be lethal to a helicopter gunship, the one aircraft powerful, accurate and maneuverable enough to get in and do damage to this camp. So communist forces can't get at this place overland and they can't destroy it from the air. The mujaheddin can stay here as long as they want.

So what are the prospects of neutralizing operations in Afghanistan? Aside from the fact that the Soviets have spent six years trying to do just that, two things make neutralizing operations unlikely:

One is the men in this camp, who they are, what they want and the way they are organized to go about getting it. The other is the terrain and topography spread out to the right — the network of roads, trails, tracks and riverbeds in the Afghan interior along with the people who are willng, at any cost, to keep men and supplies moving by night and hidden by day and the inexhaustable variety of ways that this can be accomplished.

First, the men of the Al Fatah bridade of Hizb-e-Islami: Bridade commander Barak Atullah, 38 is a lean, bearded careworn man upon whom authority rests easily but unmistakably. He joined Hizb-e in 1973 — illegally — while serving as an officer in the Afghan army. Until the communist takeover in 1978 he availed himself of Russian training and gained extensive command experience — not to mention intimate familiarity with his current adversaries — before defecting to the then-embryonic resistance movement with half the men and all of the weapons under his command.

With eight years of uninterrupted command experience, Barak Atullah is by any standard an eminently qualified professional officer and the brigade he commands conspicuously reflects his competence and sense of purpose.

Having spent several nights in the officers mess — a crude, but sturdy mud building — I have had an opportunity to discuss in some detail the duties, background and attitudes of most of the headquarters staff. The officers are all university or technical-institute trained, or else they are former officers in the Afghan army. Command functions are broken down into operations, logistics, administration, intelligence training and personnel sections as in any well organized army.

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I have seen other camps and, further inside, field elements of several other Hizb-e units. The army they have in this small sector alone must constitute close to a light division in strength. And it is lean, mean, battle hardened, tightly organized constellation of combat units.

The topography, road network, and the pattern of town, village and hamlet of the Jogji plain are typical of the part of Afghanistan which is not high Himalayan or desert wasteland. An environment more suitable for indigenous guerrilla operations would be difficult to imagine.

A skein of tree-lined roads, fields and streams provide almost continuous cover. The widely dispersed dwellings of the former inhabitants, though mostly in ruins, still provide sanctuary ideal to the small-unit operations of the resistance. The frequent appearance of jets and gunships is usually no more than a nuisance, for cover is almost always close at hand. Though most major movement is conducted at night, it is clear that small units have the run of such areas during daylight as well.

Thus the infiltration of men and supplies that underpins the bulk of resistance activities is unhindered. Though the resistance is more careful as they approach communist-controlled cities and towns, it is virtually impossible to distinguish small groups of mujaheddin from refugees and traders. So when the Soviets do hit the resistance, it is usually coincidental to their attacks on groups of Afghan civilians.

Since resistance operates with light weapons using tactics of ambush, hit and run, assassination etc., and rarely engages large forces in pitched battles, the freedom of movement they enjoy ensures their continued success.

The Soviet strategy has less to do with engaging the mujaheddin than it does with systematically forcing the population in the lowlands out in order to create a *cordon sanitaire* between the Moslem republics of the Soviet Union and the rest of the Islamic world. One of the primary goals of the Soviet effort in Afghanistan is to prevent Islamic ferment from reaching the Soviet Union.

With the Soviets pursuing this strategy, the mujaheddin, with their own relatively low combat losses and high enemy kill ratio, along with continual desertions and defections from the Afghan army, is free to pursue what has become a protracted war of attrition.

The Soviets and their Afghan allies already control everything they can control in terms of towns, cities, highways and most important, control of the country's natural resources. The Soviets find themselves engaged in a classic guerrilla war, and it would take an enormous increment of additional troops on their part to bring even a minimal change in balance to their advantage. So the war is a standoff and the mujaheddin will not — under any foreseeable circumstances — stand down.

If the Afghan resistance cannot be rooted out or neutralized militarily, or cajoled, convinced or bribed to quit, how can outsiders deal on Afghanistan? According to the British newsmagazine the "Economist"; "the hard part would be . . .to persuade Pakistan and its American and Chinese backers to halt the flow of weapons to the Afghan resistance." Cutting off their supplies has an elegantly simple appeal, but it doesn't look quite so simple from here.

The supply lines to the Afghan resistance are, in their own way, as invulnerable as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. That long, arduous, heavily defended lifeline was a crucial part of the genius of the Indochina war. No less is the genius of this war to be found in the peculiar and amazing supply lines of the Afghan resistance. Every tribesman tooling up the wadi, riverbed or camel track in his brand new burgundy dual-cab, 4x4 Toyota Hi-Lux truck—hauling for the mujaheddin—at 200 rupees a trip reflects the individualism, fortitude and acquisitiveness that is the essence of the Khyber tribal people.

The prescient American AID official who thought of providing these people with all these trucks contributed inestimably to the efficiency of the system that supplies the resistance. But if the trucks weren't here, the same items would be transported with camels, horses, donkeys and women. Supplying the mujaheddin is now well integrated into the social fabric of the tribal areas. As long as there is money to pay for the goods, the mujaheddin will be sustained by a million little entrepreneurs, each with his own way in and out, all of them doing well by doing good.

So the only question left is money, and the authentically Islamic elements of the Afghan resistance — which is most of it — have a legitimate claim on the treasure of the Islamic world that cannot be refused. Interviews with representatives from the Islamic Conference, the Muslim Brotherhood and officials from other parts of the Islamic world, indicate that they consider financial support for the mujaheddin a religious obligation. Western and Chinese assistance is of course welcome, but were it to be cut off it would be both prudent and realistic to assume mujaheddin demands on their fellow Muslims would simply increase.

No one in the West or the Soviet Union has any control over this Islamic connection and such money as is needed to keep this war going will be supplied for as long as the mujaheddin want to fight.

So bills will be paid and supplies provided to a well-organized and effective army in the field that operates with virtual impunity and sustains kill-casualty ratios that are acceptable into the indefinite future.

So the Soviets can't get at them. They don't want to play ball with the superpowers, and they don't have to. It is conceivable that political pressure will be brought to bear at some point to negotiate a settlement, but as long as they can get supplies and operate in the interior, this army is not likely to be the quid in anybody's quid pro quo.

James Pittaway, a freelance writer who has lived and traveled extensively in Afghanistan over the last 15 years, recently spent a month there and in Pakistan.